**What is a gesture?**

[http://www.aslts.ca/**glorifiedgestures**.shtml](http://www.aslts.ca/glorifiedgestures.shtml)

What is a gesture? By definition, a gesture is the spontaneous movement of the hands and body which expresses a concept in irregular and imprecise fashion. Each of us uses gestures as an accompaniment to speech, although we are often unaware of our gesturing. In some cultures, gesture systems are highly developed and speakers quite consciously accompany their speech with arm and body movements. Whatever the role of gesture in the culture, gestures vary from speaker to speaker and on different occasions vary even for the same speaker.

Describing signs as glorified gestures however, indicates a serious misconception. To a person unfamiliar with ASL, signs may appear to consist of random hand and body movements accompanied by various facial expressions. The ability to separate the connected flow of signs into its individual components develops after introduction to the language. The same process is identifiable in spoken languages. The speech sounds of a language are noises produced by the speech organs. These noises are separated into meaningful words, phrases, and sentences, only if one knows the particular language.

Man can produce an infinite variety of vocal sounds, but each spoken language has a unique selection of fewer than sixty sounds. Each language also has a particular way of combining them into words and larger meaningful units. These sounds - consonants and vowels - are combined according to rules which specify the possible combinations for a particular language. A possible combination in English is br as in the word brick, or ts as in cats, but bn does not occur. Note also that no English word ends in br or begins with ts. However, borrowed words sometimes violate these rules. Consider the words tse-tse fly and tsimmes.

In addition to these word-formation rules, other rules determine subtle changes that take place when certain sounds occur together. For example, the English negative prefix "in-" takes different forms depending on the sound that follows: invariable, impossible, illegal, irresponsible. The rules that specify the possible combinations of sounds in a particular language are unstated agreements that native speakers apply, even though they may not be consciously aware of them. These rules are part of the structure of the language analyzed and described by linguists. Every person who grew up speaking a particular language knows the rules of his language at an unconscious level, can use them correctly, and also recognizes when they are not being used correctly - by a foreigner, for example. However, the rules are so complex that to date, linguists have not been able to write down all the rules of a single language. The complexity of the rules can be illustrated by the fact that all attempts to use computers for linguistic analysis, for the translation of foreign languages, and for the transcription of spoken language into a written form have thus far achieved only very limited results.

Nor are the rules limited to the sounds of a language. Each language has a unique set of rules that specifies how words are formed, combined, and interpreted. Generally, people are unable to state the rules, but this does not mean they do not know them. Their consistent use of the rules in everyday conversation shows this and provides for a ready-made environment for language learning in children. In every society, children acquire - without formal training - the rules for creating and comprehending an infinite set of sentences by observing how adults and older children communicate around them.

In spite of their differences, languages share many important features. All languages have similar grammatical categories, such as nouns and verbs. Every language has the means for indicating time, for forming questions, or negating statements, and so on. All languages are equally complex and capable of expressing any idea. A language which appears simple in some respects is likely to be more complex in others. For example, while English has a relatively simple grammar, in comparison to Greek and Finnish, it contains a very large number of expressions whose meanings cannot be determined by their individual parts. Consider the phrase fall in (meaning to line up) or the phrase to kick the bucket (meaning to die). Phrases of this kind are known as idiomatic expressions. It is easy to understand the difficulty a foreigner faces in attempting to master idiomatic expressions in English, despite its so-called "simple" grammar.

Sign languages are of course different from spoken languages because the former make use of the visual channel and the latter the auditory channel. However, linguists who study ASL have determined that signs are structured movements in the same way that spoken words are structured sounds. Specific rules apply within the American Sign Language and are unconsciously known by ASL users. Most signs are made in a limited area extending from the top the head to just below the waist; the signing space is limited on the sides so as to form an imaginary square with the top and bottom.



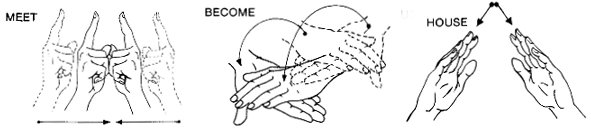
Just as some people speak in a softer or louder voice, some signers use a larger area of the signing space than others. During a sign conversation, the "listener" watches the signer's face, usually maintaining eye contact. Signs made on or near the face tend to be small and most use only one hand. When the signs are made further away from the face, often the two hands perform the same movement with the same handshape.

These patterns conform to our ability to perceive the signing space while retaining eye contact. However, neither pattern is part of the signer's awareness. This is also true for the conventions of English word formation which are not part of the consciousness of speakers of English.

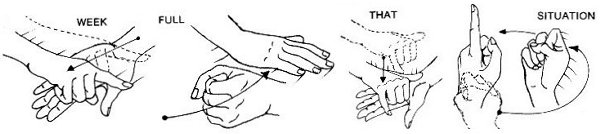
In spite of the difference of channels, linguists find striking similarities between the structure of spoken and sign languages. Signs are made by combining simultaneously handshapes, orientation of the palms, movements of the hand(s), and their locations on or near the body. ASL has approximately 18 handshapes, 12 locations, and 23 types of movements. The exact number varies in the same way that the number of vowels in spoken English varies, depending on the dialect.

There are formational rules which specify the possible combinations for signs in ASL. Combinations which violate the rules are considered to be impossible ASL signs, although they may be combinations that occur in other sign languages. These rules are of the same type which determine what combinations of vowels and consonants are possible English words, thereby excluding other combinations such as rbiatp, for example.

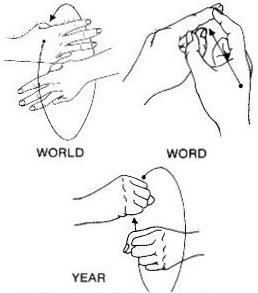
In ASL, signs which are made with both hands moving independently must have identical handshapes and movements as in MEET, BECOME, and HOUSE.



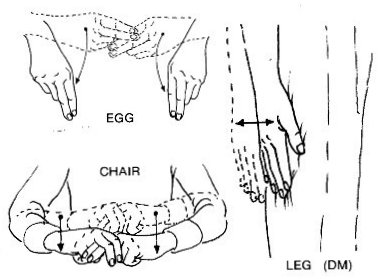
For signs which have nonidentical handshapes, one hand serves as a base and usually remains stationary while the other executes the movement, as in WEEK, FULL, THAT and SITUATION. The moving hand is normally the dominant hand - the right hand for many signers (or the left hand for left-handed individuals). Of all the different possible handshapes in ASL, only 6 normally occur as the base hand of those signs made with two different handshapes. Naturally, as with spoken languages, there are a few exceptions to the rules.



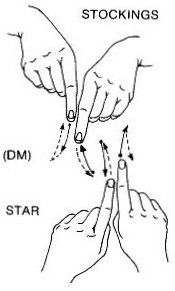
Experimental and historical evidence shows that in the brain, signs, like words, are processed according to their structure. If we ask hearing people to listen to and repeat a list of six or seven unrelated words, their errors in remembering will be indicated by words that are similar in sound (structure) to the words actually presented to them. For example, they make substitutions like: means for beans, cat for cab, and coat for coke.

In a study with deaf users of ASL, subjects were asked to remember lists of signs that are translations for these words. Their mistakes were signs whose structures are like the signs presentedin the original list. The signer's errors, when they occurred, are neither concept-related nor sound-related. In other words, deaf people are not likely to replace WORLD with WORD, nor EGG with LEG. Rather, signers substituted WORLD for YEAR, STOCKINGS for STAR, and EGG for CHAIR. If signs were in fact glorified gestures, that is spontaneous and unstructured mimed descriptions, one would expect the subjects of these experiments to replace signs they had forgotten by other signs for similar objects, such as SHOE for BOOTS, and FLOOR for GROUND. The evidence from these experiments does not support this assumption

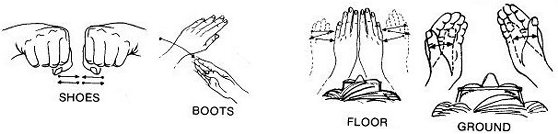
WORLD and YEAR share structural similarities in sign language. A signer would be unlikely to substitute WORD for WORLD.



EGG and LEG are structurally related in English, but not in ASL. A signer would be more likely to substitute EGG for CHAIR in ASL because their handshapes and placement are structurally similar.

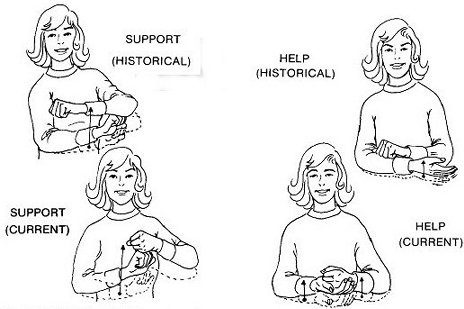


The handshape and movement needed to make the signs STARS and STOCKINGS are identical. The difference between the signs is the hand placement relative to the body

**

Each pair of signs represents similar objects. Deaf signers do not make substitutions of these signs for each other.

**Looking Back**   
Using old sign language dictionaries and films made by the National Association of the Deaf in 1913, researchers have compared present day ASL with earlier stages of the language. Regular patterns of change have been observed and described by linguists. For example, some signs which used to be made on the left elbow - like SUPPORT and HELP - are now made on the left hand. In some geographical areas and in some age groups these signs are still made in the older way. Regional, social, racial, and sexual variation in ASL is distributed in regular patterns, similar to the patterns observed in English (for example, a New York accent, teenage slang, or a style for reading out loud from a prepared text).



Although space limitations restrict a lengthy discussion of the investigations carried out thus far in the historical development of sign languages, it is important to note a few of the general conclusions resulting from these studies:

The changes from history are not random and sporadic, but can be grouped into regular patterns.   
The same type of historical rules which modify the form of spoken words, also change the physical form of signs.

The regularity of patterns of historical change in signs, together with the other evidence described above, has led linguists to conclude that signs are highly structured symbols. Further, signs are verbal symbols because, like spoken or written words, they represent concepts. Any fluent ASL signer is a verbal individual, whether or not he has complete knowledge of a spoken language. As we know from our own experience, fluency in one language does not guarantee fluency in a second language. In the past, however, a deaf person who was fluent in ASL, but not fluent in English was identified as low-verbal by some individuals. This is as inappropriate as applying that same label to a member of the Russian Academy of Sciences simply because he does not know English!

*Courtesy of -* [*http://facstaff.gallaudet.edu/harry.markowicz/a*](http://facstaff.gallaudet.edu/harry.markowicz/asl/index.html)

**The definitions and linguistic information are adapted and represented by permission of the publisher from** *Linguistics of American Sign Language:  An Introduction,* 4th ed., by Clayton Valli, Ceil Lucas, and Kristin J. Mulrooney **(Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2006): (pg. 3-5; 12; 17; 19; 28-31; 40-41; 49-54; 56-60; 62; 65-67; 70-72; 76-82; 84-86; 111; 113-124; 141; 161; 196; 200; 203; 253; 258-279; 313; 338-339; 370-371; 374-375; 440-442).  Copyright 2006 by Gallaudet University.**

**Classifier**

SEE *depicting* under [Verb Tense](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#verbtense)

**Compounds**

[Morphology](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#morphology) is the study of word formation.  One of the many ways to form words or new words is through combining two or more *free* [morphemes](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#morpheme) in English and putting them together creating compound words.  The patterns that arise when two or more words are put together are:

1. they form a new word with a new meaning
2. and the stress is usually on the first word of the compound while the stress on the second is usually reduced.

Examples in English language are:  gréenhouse, bláckboard, and bláckberry

In ASL when two words come together to form a compound predictable changes or patterns also take place as the result of morphological and [phonological](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#phonology) rule applications.  The morphological rules includes:

1. initial contact with the body will be the portion of the sign that is maintained
2. internal movement or repetition of movement is eliminated
3. and often the signers weak hand anticipates the second sign in the compound.

At least three phonological rules may be applied whenever signs are produced in sequence and do not result in any changes in meaning:

1. movement epenthesis
2. hold deletion (referring to sign movement)
3. assimilation - when a segment of one sign teakes on the characteristic of another segment (usually just before or after)

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **ASL Compounds** | **English Translation** |
| blue⁀spot | bruise |
| face⁀new | stranger |
| good⁀night | goodnight |

**Contrastive Unit**

Basic building blocks of the English sound system are [phonemes](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#phonemes).  Put another way, the basic phonetic parts that can be isolated and compared.  When compared or contrasted against each other to assess the different sounds they make, it is the difference in the sounds that influence the symbols different meanings between two words such as / t /:  tip and lip.

The basic building blocks of ASL are the five basic parts or parameters to each sign:  handshape, movement, location, orientation, and nonmanual signals.  When comparing one sign against another, "it is the difference in one parameter that is responsible for the difference in meaning" (pg. 17).  For more information regarding contrastive units see page 30-31.

**Depiction**

SEE *depicting* under [Verb Tense](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#verbtense)

**Language Variants** or **Dialects**

The systematic differences that exist within a particular language are often referred to as language variety or language variation.  When a group of speakers of a particular language differs noticeably in its speech or sign from another group we say that they are speaking another dialect.  Factors affecting different dialects can be caused by regional, cultural, or ethnicity to name a few.  This explains why a hearing impaired American citizen using American Sign Language (ASL) is unable to converse with a British citizen using British Sign Language (BSL).  Even though the hearing majority of each country has little trouble understanding each others spoken and/or written English dialect, hearing impaired have a more difficult time understanding each other due to a much larger distance between the differences of the dialects.

**Lexical**

The vocabulary of a language and their grammatical categories the words and/or signs function as within a sentence.

**Minimal Pairs**

In a spoken language, such as English, a minimal pair is defined as word pairs that could be pronounced exactly the same way except for the one letter sound that differs between them.  This sound difference is what creates words that will represent different meanings, for example,  lack and rack.

It is important to note that the sound-system of spoken or written English is not the same as the letters of English.  For more information on the sound system of English see pages 258-279 in Valli, Lucas, and Mulrooney's text, *Linguistics of American Sign Language*.

In a manual and visual language such as ASL, a minimal pair is defined as any two signs that will share three out of the four production parameters:  *handshape, palm orientation, movement*, and *location*.  The change of only one of thesse parameters will represent different meanings, for example, father / mother (*handshape, palm orientation, movement* are the same; *location* is different).

**Morpheme**

"The smallest meaningful unit in a language is a morpheme.  Some morphemes can occur by themselves, as independent units" (pg. 49).  These are *free* morphemes such as: cat and sit in the English language.  Other morphemes are considered *bound* morphemes because they cannot occur as independent units alone and must occur with other morphemes.  Examples of bound morphemes are affixes such as:  -s (cat + s = cats).  Smaller parts combine and join to make larger wholes.  In the English language, *unbound* morpheme + *bound* morpheme = word.

In ASL, examples of *free* morphemes are CAT and LOUSY.  Examples of ASL *bound* morphemes that must occur with other morphemes is the '3' handshape in the ASL signs of THREE-WEEKS and THREE-MONTHS.  In ASL:  handshape + movement + other grammatical features = sign(s)

**Morphology**

"Morphology is the study of the smallest *meaningful* unit in language and of how those *meaningful* units are used to build new words or signs" (pg. 49).  Put another way, morphology is the study of word or sign formation.  Examples of *meaningful* units in English are all affixes (e.g., -s, -er, -un, -ful, or root words such as sit, compound words, borrowings from other languages, or a changing of the stress (') in a word as in contést/cóntest converting a verb into a noun.

In ASL morphology, "whole signs that already exist are used to derive new signs" such as:  "verbs used to derive nouns" (SIT and CHAIR), two signs put together to form compounds (BRUISE and STRANGER), how English orthographic symbols are represented by ASL fingerspelling signs" and lexicalized (#ALL), and "how signs from other sign languages are borrowed into ASL (ITALY and CHINA)" (pg. 70).

**Noun-Verb Pairing**

A universal property, a feature shared by all languages, is that of related nouns and verbs.  For example, in English, this common linguistic pattern is seen in the words teach (verb) and teacher (+er = noun) or crystal (noun) and crystalize (+ ize = verb).  This word building strategy is accomplished by adding an affix, a bound morpheme, to a particular position on a word stem.

Understanding the process of [morphology](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#morphology) in the majority spoken/written language, English, is helpful in understanding ASL morphology.  "ASL also has verbs and nouns that show a regular pattern" in word building (pg  51-54).  In place of the change in written symbols, it requires a change in one of the parameters, ***movement***.  Where the parameters of *handshape, location*, and *orientation* remain the same, it is the *movement* that creates the difference between the meanings of the two signs by repeating or duplicating.  Examples of verb and noun pairs are:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **VERB** | **NOUN** |
| *Movement*:  hold-movement-hold  H – M - H | *Movement:*  movement-hold-movement  M – H - M   repeated |
| sit | chair |
| fly | Airplane |
| sell | store |

This repetition or *reduplication* is the morpheme in ASL.  In ASL, there is not a morpheme form added to the word SIT to derive the noun CHAIR.  The morpheme, SIT, is simply repeated.

**Numerical Incorporation**

Numeral incorporation in ASL is found with the signs of:  WEEK, MONTH, DAY, DOLLAR AMOUNT, PLACE IN A RACE, EXACT TIME, PERIOD OF TIME, and HEIGHT with some limitations on how high the numbers can go.  For example, using the sign for WEEK requires two hands and by changing the *handshape* of the dominant hand from 1, 2, or 3 the number of weeks referred to changes.  These *handshapes*, meaningful units or *bound* [morphemes](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#morpheme), cannot occur alone. Combined, they create a new meaning.  "The *location, orientation*, and *nonmanual signal* remain the same.  We can say that the signs for TWO-WEEK has two meaningful parts (morphemes).  One is the part that includes the segmental structure -- the holds and *movement* -- and the *location*, *orientation*, and *nonmanual signal*.  It means WEEK.  The other meaningful part is the *handshape*, which has the meaning of a specific number" (pg. 70-72).  By adding the numerical *handshape* it makes the sign WEEK  plural (in English:  week + -s = weeks / in ASL: WEEK + THREE = WEEKS)

*Palm orientation* and *movement* is important in indicating the number of things, objects, or persons being discussed depending on the situation.  ASL does not tend to add on to signs as a spoken and written language does such as adding the affix or bound morpheme of the inflectional -s to make nouns plural.  Instead, for nouns ASL often uses noun modifiers such as:  determiners (A, MANY, FEW), numbers, or reduplication to indicate a signs ins plural.

**Phonemes**

The basic symbols and the sounds attached to those symbols represent the phonology of the language.  These differ from letters of an alphabet in that phonemes relate to pronunciations, not spelling.  For example, the word graph phonetically could appear as graf.  In English this would be a symbol or symbols representing a letter or group of letters each producing a single phonetic sound.  In spoken languages, phonemes combine to produce communication.

In ASL, "sign phonology does not involve sound patterning or vocally based features..." (pg 336).  However, according to Valli, Lucas, and Mulrooney, the definition of *phonology* has been expanded to mean the "patterning of the formational units of the expression system of a natural language" (pg 336), and it is the use of spacial contrasts that "function at the sub-lexical level in signed languages to indicate phonological contrasts" (pg336).  "*Location* is one of the formational units of sign language phonology, claimed to be somewhat analogous to consonants in spoken language" (pg 336).  For more in-depth information on this topic SEE Valli, Lucas, and Mulrooney.

**Phonology**

Phonology is defined as the study of the smallest [contrastive unit](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#contrastiveunit) of any language that does not have meaning.  In an oral and written language, English, phonology is equivalent to sounds assigned to the letter symbols.  For a manual language, ASL, it is how sign symbols are structured and organized.

**Plural (Marker)**

SEE[**Numerical Incorporation**](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#numericalincorporation)

**Pronouns**

Semantically, in ASL, the pronoun encodes a single entity, unspecified for gender or case.  In ASL, the index finger depending on the [directionality](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/asl-basics.php#directionality), *movement*, and *handshape* when pointed represents the pronouns:  I, ME, YOU, HE, SHE, IT, WE, YOU-ALL, and THEY.  Just as in English, there are number differences referring to one or more persons.  Indexing combined with a sweeping motion and/or numerical incorporation can represent the pronouns:  THEY, THOSE, THEM, THESE, THOSE-THREE, THOSE-TWO, WE-THREE, THE THREE OF YOU, and THE TWO OF YOU.  Possessive pronouns are accomplished by changing the sign from the pointing the index finger to a flat open palm directed at the person who has possession.  For specific information on the signed details of each of these pronouns, SEE Valli, Lucas, and Mulrooney's textbook.

Just as in English, ASL has subject and object pronouns in the first, second, and third person.  Although depending on whom you ask, second and third person pronouns are strongly debated for ASL.  When glossing ASL into English, pronouns are represented as PRO.1, PRO.2, and PRO.3 correlating to first, second, and third person pronouns.

* However, unlike English, ASL does not indicate masculine and feminine gender in the third person as in the signs HE and SHE.  This is accomplished by the [directionality](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/asl-basics.php#directionality) of point the index finger toward the referent (absent or hypothetical entity once established or present entity).  Once the referent is established, it is important that the signer is consistent with point to the loci.
* Another discrepancy between the languages English and ASL is English distinguishes between subject and object pronouns, ASL does not.  In ASL, the distinction between subject and object pronouns is accomplished through the directionality of the signs and the order they are produced or the syntactical structure.  The point helps to establish a connection between an entity and within a semantic representation and an entity in the immediate environment of the signer.  Once the referent is established, it is important that the signer is consistent with point to the loci.

**Semantics**

The study of the meaning of words within a rule-governed system.  It is a common feature that every language and the meaning of its words or signs are determined by the users of a specific community.

Dictionaries are considered the definitive source of word or signed meanings in all linguistic cultures.  It is important to bear in mind that dictionaries are not a comprehensive resource for all words or signs, rather they are only a sampling or minimal resource and the authors only reflect the users of a particular community.

Sign language dictionaries are unique in that they are intimately related to the majority written or spoken language making them bilingual out of necessity.  There is the "potential problem...that the same sign may have different English glosses assigned to it or different signs may be assigned to the same English gloss.  Therefore, the meaning of the sign may not always be clear from the gloss assigned to it" (pg 142).

**Syntax**

The rules within a language that governs sentence structure.  This is often referred to as grammar or the grammatical structure of sentences.

In English, there are eight [lexical](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#lexical) categories that compose grammatical sentence structures;

* nouns
* pronouns
* verbs
* adjectives
* adverbs
* prepositions
* conjunctions
* and interjections

The same single word can function as more than one part of speech within two separate sentences.  Depending on how it is used, the linguistic rules will dictate its placement within each sentence relative to other words in the sentence.

Word + word + word + word + word. = sentence

John *paints* on the canvas.  (verb)          *Paints* come in many colors.  (noun)

In ASL, there are two categories of lexical structures, major and minor.

The major lexical categories are:

* nouns
* predicates (includes verbs, however, some adj & adv function as predicates and ASL does not always require a verb)
* adjectives
* and adverbs

The minor lexical categories are:

* determiners (DET: pointing signs always with the index finger and always occur before/after/or simultaneously with a noun)
* auxiliary verbs (tend to show up at either the beginning or end of a sentence -- accompany other verbs/predicates to add tense and aspect information) "[Morphemes](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#morpheme) can be added to auxiliary verbs by incorporating[*nonmanual signs*](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/asl-basics.php#non-manualsignals)" (brow up, lips drawn etc) (pg. 120).
* prepositons (there are fewer preposition in ASL and many act like predicates, not preposition (SEE Example\*).  The sign 'AT' functions like the English preposition.
* Conjunctions (consist of BUT, UNDERSTAND, OR, and PLUS (SEE Example\*)
* and pronouns (SEE [Pronouns](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#pronouns))

                                                               sign + sign + sign + sign + sign = sentence

\*OLD FEELING STILL INSIDE-MY-CHEST                                          \*YOU BRING TV SHELF PLUS SOFA

   Adj     N         Adv    (Prepositonal) Pred                                             PRO.3  Pred              N                   N     Conj  N

    I   still   have   those  (same) feelings  inside.                     You     bring  the television, shelf,  and  sofa.

Topic-Comment

Two of the [universals](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#universals) for all languages are the fact that

1. they all contain nouns and predicates (verb group)
2. and they all have a basic word order when structuring sentences.  For English the general word order is:

Subject   +   Verb    +   Object (SV))   =   Sentence

Mother         likes          the neighbor.

The girl        is funny.

For simple sentences with transitive (verbs with an object) plain (SEE Verbs) verbs in ASL, the basic word order follows the same patterns of:

Subject    +    Verb    +    Object (SVO)   =   Sentence

MOTHER      LIKE          NEIGHBOR

With intransitive verbs (those without an object) the sentence pattern is...

Subject    +    Verb (SV)    =    Sentence

  GIRL            FUNNY

However, it is common for ASL signers to emphasize important information or the topic of the sentence through the use of *topicalization* by placing the subject or object first accompanied by *nonmanual signals* and followed by the verb.  This is commonly referred to as Topic-Comment structure.   The Topic = subject or object; and the Comment = predicate (verb or verb group).

Topic/Object   +   Subject   +   Comment (Verb Phrase)

 BALL,              JOHN             THROW

If the topic of the conversation is taking place at any other time then the present tense, than the signer would establish the tense (past or future) first in the sentence structure and proceed to Topic-Comment.

Time    +      Topic   +   Subject   +   Comment (Verb Phrase)

YESTERDAY    BALL,     JOHN          THROW

A pronoun can be placed between 'topic' and 'comment' (topic - (pronoun) - comment).

Time   +        Topic   +   S-PRO.3   +   Comment

YESTERDAY     BALL,          SHE          THROW

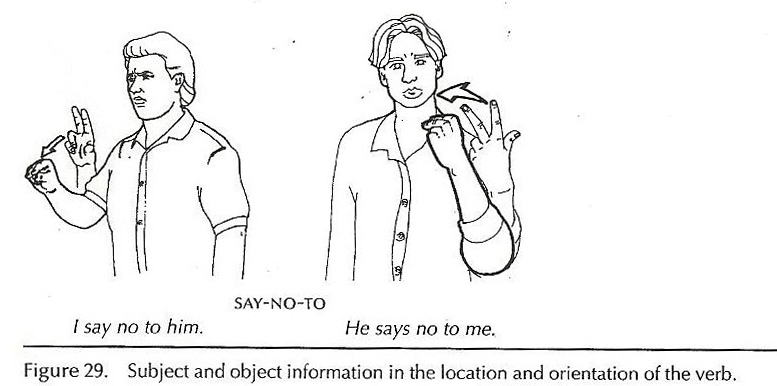
**Universals**

Universal properties are characteristics that are shared by all languages.  All languages have shared features and at least some linguistic properties, called 'universals', common to all languages. For example, all languages are composed of symbols. However, not all languages share every linguistic property.

**Verbs**

Valli, Lucas, and Mulrooney use these terms in their text and can be found on pages 76-82

* *Plain* - These verbs are produced in a static *location* that cannot be altered without changing the meaning of the sign.  Therefore, accurate *location* is key.  "The *location* does not have any independent meaning and plain verbs do not contain information about the subject or object of a sentence" (pg. 76).  Examples are:  EAT, HAVE, LIKE, LOVE, or FORGET
* *Indicating* - These verbs are more dynamic than plain verbs because they include the parameters of *location, movement*, and sometimes *orientation*.  They move toward specific people, objects, or spatial location, and in doing this, they incorporate additional information about the subject and object of the sentence.  Separate signs for the subject and object are often omitted because the direction or movement of the verb contributes this information.  (SEE illustration)



* + *reciprocal verbs* - are a type of *indicating* verb that adds information by showing reciprocating action.  For example, each hand can represent two separate individuals doing the same action as in LOOK-AT EACH OTHER.
  + *locative verb*s - are a type of *indicating* verb.  Unlike the plain verb, the *location* parameter is how the sign is made and the actual direction or *location* of the sign contains specific meaning such as in the signs LOOK, THROW  or PUT.   The direction f the sign indicates the direction in which the object is acted upon such as:  up, downward, around, or toward a particular area.  *Handshapes* of *locative* signs do not have independent meaning.
  + *depicting verbs* - until recently these were more commonly referred to as *classifier predicates*.  This category of verb can be divided into three main types and have the distinct ability to convey two types of information:  (1)  action or state of being and (2)  relay information about certain aspects of their meaning.  The three main types of categories that can be used synchronically during signing are:
    - those used to show or establish where something or someone is in space
    - those used to show what something looks like, how it is shaped, or how objects or people are arranged in relation to each other.  In addition, this type of verb can provide two types of information:  physical condition or the objects location and where it extends to as in driving a car (object being discussed) up a hill on a bumpy road by the parameters [movement](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/asl-basics.php#internalstructure), [location](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/asl-basics.php#internalstructure), and [orientation](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/asl-basics.php#internalstructure).
    - those that show movements or actions from one point to another

Although these terms are useful in describing the different types of verbs in ASL, not all linguists use these terms.

**Verb Tense**

In English there are a total of 12 verb tenses classified as:  *present, past*, and *future*, with *simple perfect* and *progressive* forms for each.

In ASL, there is *present, past*, and *future* determined by an imaginary time line that splits the body perpendicular.  The area near the body is *present*, in the back of the body is the *past*, and further in front of the body is *future*.  The tense or time of the event is established at the beginning of the signer's sentence.  In addition, there are [lexical](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#lexical) signs (LATER, NOW, MORNING, YEAR, TODAY, TOMORROW) used to indicate the time of an event.

"Verbs can include information about the subject and the object in the *orientation* or *location* parts of their structure" (pg. 111).  *Palm orientation* and *movement* is important indicating the number of things, objects, or persons being discussed depending on the situation.  ASL does not tend to add on to signs as a spoken language does, such as, adding the affix or *bound* morpheme of the inflectional -s, -ed, or -ing to make third person agreement with verbs (walks, plays), paste tense (walked, played), or progressive action (walking, playing).  Rather than add on to verbs, ASL tends to change the fundamental structure, as in the case of temporal aspect, or change one part of one segment of a sign, as in the case of indicating verbs.

"-s" third person agreement affix:  This written symbol does not exist in ASL.  However, "Verbs can include grammatical information about the subject and the object in the (*palm*) *orientation* or *location* parts of their structure" (pg. 111).  For example in English the sentence, *He Walks to the store.*, would be STORE HE WALK in ASL.  The agreement is in the *palm orientation, location*, and/or directionality of the referent to "HE".

"-ed" past tense affix:  This written symbol does not exist in ASL.  However, in order to establish past tense the signer uses a past tense marker or sign at the beginning of the sentence or topic such as dominant hand waiving over the shoulder or by use of a lexical sign (LATER, NOW, MORNING, YEAR, TODAY,  or TOMORROW).  Once established, the time frame or tense is understood within the context of the conversation until the tense is changed to a different time frame.

"-ing" progressive verbs affix:  There is no affix or *bound* morpheme of the inflectional -ing in ASL.  Progression is demonstrated by reduplication or through implication of other lexical signs.  For example in English the sentence, *Peyton is swinging*., could be PEYTON SWING.  Repeating the sign indicating a process.

"to be" verbs:  "Many languages do not use the verb to be.  In those languages, a predicate may consist of simply a verb, a noun, or an adjective as in ASL.  For example in English the sentence, *The girl is happy.* would be the equivalent of GIRL HAPPY in ASL.  The ASL sentence consists of the noun, GIRL, and a predicate that is an adjective, HAPPY.  The parts of speech verbs, nouns, and adjectives can be predicates in ASL" (pg 90).

<http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#morphology>

**The definitions and linguistic information are adapted and represented by permission of the publisher from *Linguistics of American Sign Language:  An Introduction,* 4th ed., by Clayton Valli, Ceil Lucas, and Kristin J. Mulrooney (Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press, 2006): (pg. 3-5; 12; 17; 19; 28-31; 40-41; 49-54; 56-60; 62; 65-67; 70-72; 76-82; 84-86; 111; 113-124; 141; 161; 196; 200; 203; 253; 258-279; 313; 338-339; 370-371; 374-375; 440-442).  Copyright 2006 by Gallaudet University.**

**Absent Referents**

A signing technique used to refer to something or someone that is absent during a conversation.  This applies to pointing and directing signs of both verbs and pronouns at the designated empty space that someone or something being discussed is assigned.  This pointing to the empty space is referred to as the 'locus' and signs directed as the loci becomes associated with the missing referent and treated just as if they/it were present.  Once the referent is established, it is important that the signer is consistent with pointing to the loci.  The pointing to the entity allows for a connection to be made between the entity and the verbs or actions being discussed; a [semantic](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#semantics) representation.  The area is generally not a single point into space but a three dimensional spatial area that takes on the size and shape of the entity.

**Directionality**

SEE [Pronouns](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#pronouns), [Indexing](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/asl-basics.php#indexing), and/or *locative* verbs under [Verbs](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#verbs).

**Fingerspelling**

Fingerspelling is a manual representation for each symbol of a written language and a direct result of written language in which it has contact with.  For each of the 26 letter symbols of the English alphabet there is an ASL corresponding sign.  Each corresponding sign has its own segmental structure and handshape, location, and orientation.  According to Lucas and Valli, "fingerspelling is a unique outcome of language contact" with the majority language, in this case, English (pg 62).  when produced slowly and distinctly, they are glossed with a hyphen between each corresponding letter such as:  M-O-O-N

**Hand Positions**

Dominant Hand - The hand most preferred for most motor tasks.  One-handed signs use the dominant hand, play a much larger role, and execute more complex motor skills.  Signers can be either right-hand or left-hand dominant with respect to signing.  For example, a larger percentage of the population is right-handed, therefore, signers with right-hand dominance means their right hand will assume the active role most of the time, while the left hand is held still, passive.

Passive Hand - Might best be described as the non-dominant hand or the hand that assumes the passive role.  For dominant right-handed signers, the passive hand would be the other hand, the left hand.

Symmetry Condition - One of the formations on the structure of ASL and under certain conditions.  This condition is when both hands move in a two-handed sign then both hands will have roughly the same hand shape and type of movement.  It is common to have the same hand shape and movement in alternating directions.  For example:  SHOES, SOCKS, WHICH, or TALK.  Some pairs of signs that use exactly the same handshape, but with reversed movement.  Some of these signs are used as propositions and some as verbs.  These pairs of signs are usually opposites of each other and often are referred to as 'kinship signs'.  For example, ON OFF; OPEN CLOSE

Dominance Condition - One of the formations on the structure of ASL and under certain conditions.  This condition is when each hand has a different hand shape, then only the active hand can move and the passive hand serves as a base and does not move such as:  GOODNIGHT or LEARN.

**Indexing**

Indexing is a term used when the index finger of the dominant hand is used to point at someone or something during a conversation that is either present or absent.  The use of point to a space is a referential function used with verb agreement between subject and object or when using pronouns and carries locative information of the object or person.

**Initialized Sign Signals**

Stokoe is credited with developing the first system for describing signs where the signs could be analyzed in the same way that spoken language is broken down into written units.  In an ASL dictionary, convenient labels are used to describe the three aspects of a sign:  *tabula* or *tab* (T), *designator* or *dex* (D), and *signation* or *sig* (s).  Stokoe proposed that signs have parameters.  One of the paramters was that of the handshape of the active hand (*designator* or *dex*).  Therefore, it is not uncommon to see the word 'initial-dez' (initial handshape) as in Valli, Lucas, and Mulrooney's text, to refer to initialized signs.  These signs are coinages to translate a particular English word and have the first letter of that word as the handshape (*dez*) of the manual alphabet configuration.  For example, the ASL sign for the written English word for the color YELLOW is the first letter 'Y' or 'W' for WATER.

**Internal Structure**

One of the features of all languages is that they have symbols that can be broken down into smaller parts.  This [phonology](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#phonology) is the study of the smallest [contrastive units](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#contrastiveunit) of a spoken language.  In English, the smallest contrastive units are the phonetic sounds letter symbols represent and how they are structured and organized, for example, pat and bat.  The contrastive difference is a single letter (smallest unit) of each word creating an entirely different phonetic sound and, therefore, a completely different meaning.

In contrast the phonology of ASL is how signs are structured and organized.  It is composed of five basic parts or parameters.  "Signs can share one or more of the same parameters.  It is the difference in one parameter that is responsible for the difference in the meaning" of a sign (pg. 17).  The parts or parameters are:

* Hand shape
* Location
* Movement - signs are composed of sequences of movements and holds.  Each movement or hold is known as a [segment](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/asl-basics.php#segmentalstructure) which can be added or left out depending on the [morphology](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#morphology) and/or [syntactic](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#syntax) sequence.
* Palm orientation
* Non-Manual Signals - "Non-manual signals are the facial expressions that accompany certain signs.  Many signs in ASL require a [non-manual signal](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/asl-basics.php#non-manualsignals) in order to be produced correctly" (pg. 19).

**Lexicalized Fingerspelling**

The term"...'lexicalized' means "like a word" or "word-like", that is, like an independent unit.  Lexicalization describes the process of [fingerspelling](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/asl-basics.php#fingerspelling) because the separate signs do seem to become like one" (pg. 65).  Often there is a "tendency to reduce the number of signs as they become more like other ASL signs" abbreviating and consolidating the movement eventually creates a shortened ASL version of the multiple signs (pg. 66).  In glossing, lexicalized fingerspelling is preceded by a pound (#) sign such as in the sign #ALL.

Language evolves and changes in all languages.  One common type of semantic change in the English language is a type of reduction called contractions.  An equivalent example in the English language to lexicalized fingerspelling in ASL would be the written and spoken contraction of two words where an apostrophe replaces the missing letters such as in the words: can + not = can't.

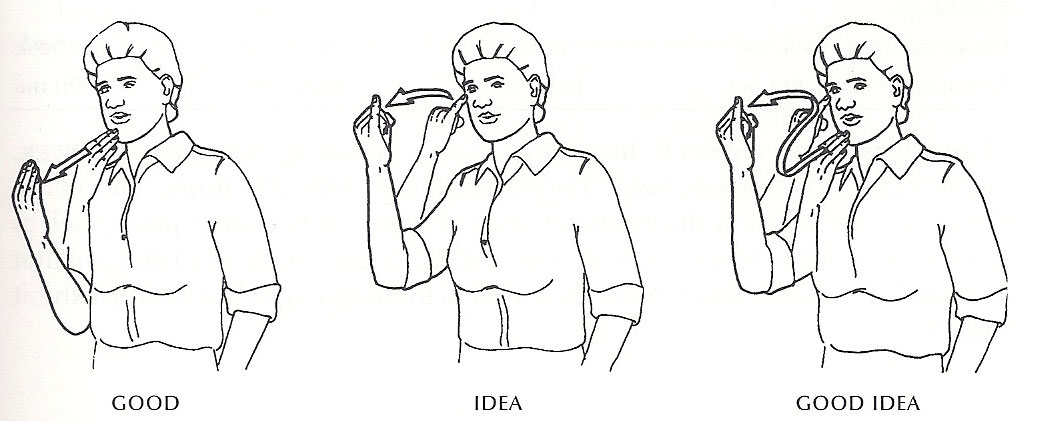
**Loan Signs**

"When two languages are in contact with each other...they may borrow from each other" (pg. 67).  English has borrowed from many languages such as pizza (Italian), algebra (Arabic), and quiche (French).

ASL also borrows from other sign languages.  The best examples are the "signs for the names of countries that are now being used instead of the American signs for those countries such as: Japan, Italy, and China.  This is a "result of American deaf people coming in contact with deaf people from those countries" (pg. 67).

**Movement Epenthesis**

Just as words in written language occur in sequence in a sentence so do individual signs occur in sequence.  Keep in mind that all signs are composed of movements and holds.  When several signs occur sequentially, "sometimes a movement segment is added between the last segment of one sign and the first segment of the next sign" (pg. 40-41).  This process of adding a movement segment is called movement epenthesis which creates fluency. (SEE illustration)



**Non-Manual Signals**

"Non-manual signals are the facial/body expressions that accompany certain signs.  Many signs in ASL require a non-manual signal in order to be produced correctly" (pg. 19).  Non-manual signals can also denote basic sentence types.  An example of a symbol used during translation to display non-manual signs might be  \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_wh-q  to denote a who, what, where, when, why sentence.  A line would be placed over the word(s) that require(s) the non-manual sign.  In the case of a 'wh' questions, the marker tells the reader that the non-manual signals that would accompany the sign would be:  eyebrows squinted, head tilted; body may be forward; shoulders may be raised.  Althought a different abbreviated symbol may be applied, this can also apply to negations, commands, topicalization, conditionals, and other types of questions sentences.  For more information SEE [Internal Structure](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/asl-basics.php#internalstructure).

**Numbering System**

Visitors can find a much more in-depth description of the numbering system at [LifePrint.com](http://www.lifeprint.com/asl101/pages-layout/numbersdiscussion.htm), along with pictures.

Numbers 1 through 5 are made with the palm facing in toward the body.

* 1 begins with the index finger extended
* each incremental increase progresses by extending the middle finger for 2
* extending the thumb for 3
* tucking the thumb into the palm and extend four fingers for 4
* and extending all fingers for the number 5

Number 6 through 9 are made with the palm facing forward.

* 6 is made by the thumb touching the little finger
* 7 is made by the thumb touching the ring finger
* 8 is made by the thumb touching the middle finger
* 9 is made by the thumb touching the index finger

10 is made with a shaking fist and thumb extended, as in the sign for 'A'

11 though 13 require the palm to begin by facing the body and flick the wrist out as the fingers touch

* 11 is made by touch the thumb to the index finger and flicking the wrist out
* 12 is made by touching the thumb to the middle finger and flicking the wrist out
* 13 is made by touch the thumb to the ringer finger and flicking the wrist out

14 is made by tucking the thumb into the palm and waiving the four fingers

15 is made by waiving the four fingers with the thumb extended

16 through 19 are made by combining the number 10 (shaking the first with thumb extended) and flicking the wrist out and forming the numbers 6 through 9 (touching little finger to the thumb and so on)

20 is touch and repeatedly closing the index finger and thumb together (as in the sign for 'bird)

For more information regarding the ASL number system, refer to Valli, Lucas, and Mulrooney.

**Segmental Structure**

Signs are composed of sequences of movements (M) and holds (H).  Each movement or hold is known as a segment which can be added or left out depending on the [morphology](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#morphology) and/or [syntactic](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#syntax) sequence.  For example, the sign GOODNIGHT consists of a Hold - Movement - Hold (H M H).  SEE also [Internal Structure](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/asl-basics.php#internalstructure)).

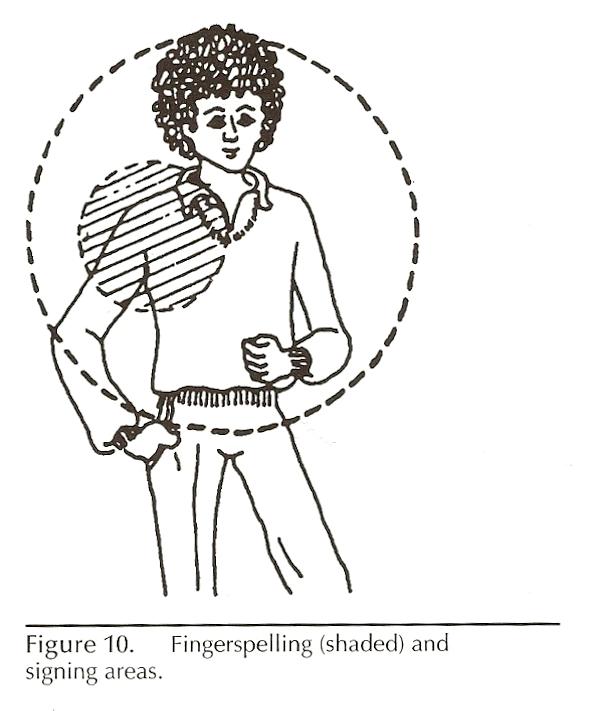
**Sequential Signs**

"Some signs have only one handshape, one movement, one location, one palm orientation, and/or one non-manual signal.  For example, the sign MOTHER has only one handshape, one location and one palm orientation with no movement or non-manual signal..." (pg. 28-29). (SEE [Internal Structure](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/asl-basics.php#internalstructure)).

However, many ASL signs use multiple internal structures:  handshape, location, palm orientation, or non-manual signal in a sequence for one sign.  For example the sign DIE or DEAF require multiple internal structures (movement, location, and/or palm orientation) and a change in one of them.

Location                    DEAF - location changes from ear to chin

Palm Orientation        DIE (1-handed) - palm orientation down to palm up

**Signing Space**

Signs may be articulated freely in space, or they may involve contacting or including part of the body.  In general the areas in which signs are made are within the parameters between the head and slightly below the waist and slightly beyond the width of both shoulders.  [Fingerspelling](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/asl-basics.php#fingerspelling) takes place within the neck/jaw to shoulder height/width area.  (SEE illustration)

**Symbol Forms**

*Arbitrary* - In any communication system, arbitrary means that the actual forms of the symbol or hand shape in sign does not reflect the form of the thing or activity it symbolizes such as:  PLEASE or THANK YOU.

*Iconic* - In sharp contrast, iconic means that the forms of a symbol or hand shape in sign is an icon or picutre of some aspect of the thing or activity being symbolized such as:  CUP, CAT, or CRY.

Considered a [Universal](http://www.sharingliteracy.com/linguistic-definitions.php#universals), all languages spoken or signed have arbitrary and iconic symbols.  In English, the symbols for the word c - a - t are arbitrary.  Neither the appearance of the symbols or their sound (**kæt**) reminds us of a cat.  However, an example of an iconic symbol in spoken English would be choo-choo for train.  Although the symbols for the words do not look like a train, their phonetic sounds mimic the sound of a train.

<http://www.sharingliteracy.com/asl-basics.php>

More on ASL:

ASL Teaching Services

<http://www.aslts.ca/iconic.shtml>

<http://www.aslts.ca/wordbased.shtml>

<http://www.aslts.ca/concrete.shtml>

<http://www.aslts.ca/ungrammatical.shtml>

<http://www.aslts.ca/ideographic.shtml>